

Date: April 27, 1983

Place: Norris Centre, Evanston

Interview with: Melvin Scribner Smith

Interviewed by: N. Lawler, T. Welliver

Observations: Mr. Smith proved to be an extremely garrulous subject. This interview proceeded more in a monologue - stream of consciousness vein than in an organized question and answer format. Only when Mr. Smith paused for breath or to light a cigarette were we able to interject a question. He began with an informal discussion of his Newsette which has 1,000 subscribers in 30 states. He has been editing the paper since 1941 (with a break for the war) as a service to the youth of the community.

Q. Where were you born?

A. I was born in Evanston in 1917 and I flunked every school in Evanston starting off in Noyes School where I flunked kindergarten. Then I went to Nashville and flunked there too. I was born at 1944 Ridge where the Cadillac dealer is now - but it wasn't a Cadillac birth. You know why I was born at home? We couldn't use the hospital here.

Q. Where could blacks go to hospital?

A. Cook County or Provident. Dr. A. R. Penn delivered me. He donated his mansion for the Community Hospital.

Q. Is there still a Community Hospital?

A. No. It was bought by Evanston Hospital and it's all boarded up now. Our history is now boarded up. It was founded by Dr. Butler and her husband at 1917 Asbury, just a few blocks from where I live now. People love to forget discrimination in Evanston. There was a big influx of blacks from the south around 1917-1920 because of troubles in the south - lynchings.

Q. Where were your parents born?

A. Tennessee. They settled in Lake Forest.

Q. Did they have jobs when they came up?

A. My mother was a former schoolteacher. She graduated from Fisk University in 1897. Fisk was an all black school. Her degree was like a junior college degree. She came up here as a housewife. My five older brothers and sisters were born in Lake Forest.

Q. What did your father do?

A. He had a scavenger service. You know in those days they didn't have any garbage collection. He took the refuse out of people's homes. My mother came down to Evanston and then in 1918 opened the Smith Employment Agency. Mr. A. James Patten, the Dyches - all those north shore families that have buildings named after them. Some had as many as forty servants. They had coach houses for their servants.

Q. Was the agency for domestic service?

A. Yes, most of the blacks were in domestic service. There were a few professionals serving the black community, but most of us were servants or did menial jobs.

Q. Where did these servants come from?

A. The south. Abbeville, South Carolina had a big tree where they had a lot of lynchings. They just cut down that tree a few years ago. Most blacks headed straight north - New York, Philadelphia, or even Canada - they wanted to get far away as possible from that rope. The amazing thing is the hardier ones drifted across to Chicago and Detroit and many spilled over into Evanston.

Q. Why did they come to Evanston?

A. They like it because it was down home. A little hick town. You know in South Carolina they had the hardiest blacks that ever came over from Africa. The governor even told the slave traders not to bring any more from that part of Africa. You know they were warriors in Africa and when they came over here there was a lot of slave revolts in South Carolina. This is the element that came here and they became the most progressive. They came up here and worked for 25¢ a day for the rich white people. The mentality of these people spilled over into the help. They'd say that they were the Pattons - taking the name of their employers. They identified themselves with the family they worked for. There was tremendous segregation in Evanston. The white folks spoke of 'our negroes.' I was one of 'their negroes.' Dr. Fremont Tittle (1st Methodist Church) and other giants of religion used the NU campus to have meetings.

Q. When was this?

A. 1930's.

Q. Was this to protest the situation?

A. Yes. This was the Evanston Interracial Council, before the Jewish element came in.

Q. What did they do?

A. They didn't want to be part of an interracial council because they're a religion not a race. So they changed the name to the Human Relations Council. The meetings were very interesting. They had a social hour. It was a chance for blacks and whites to get together without somebody serving somebody. It was humorous because the whites discussed the same problems as today - like in the Washington campaign. It always ended up with 'we like our negroes but I wouldn't want my daughter to marry one.'

Q. Could we get back to your schools now?

A. My father left town when I was six years old and my mother was left alone with six kids. It was rough. We were always getting kicked out of houses. I lived in 25 different houses by the time I got to Evanston High School. I went to kindergarten at Noyes then to Larrimer near Dempster and Oak.

Q. Was it an all black school in the 5th Ward?

A. No. It was run by whites. They tore it down after I left. Then I went to Dewey school - first or second grade. At the time I was living on Clark Street round where the Mt. Zion Baptist Church and Wieboldts are. There was a little black settlement there and there was a program to get them out for a parking lot. We were always being moved out for parking lots! The peculiarity was that blacks lived everywhere in town - it was completely integrated. They took the houses across the tracks - we were always on the wrong side of the tracks!

Q. How did they do it?

A. They bought the houses through "imminent domain" or something like that - but they left the white houses where they were. It was the Foster movers who moved them - I don't know how they got them across the tracks.

Q. When was this?

A. After the war (World War II). Before the 20's, blacks were living downtown - around where Rothschild's is. They even lived in Northwest Evanston Redneck area, the K.K.K. area. They managed to find some way of expelling them. By the thirties they had moved so many houses over to the area. Around Haven School there were lots of blacks, and the school needed a playground, or football field, and in the late 1930's they moved them out. Like I said, we were always moved out for parking lots and playgrounds. They moved them across the Canal to the Dodge Avenue, Foster area.

Q. Were the schools integrated?

A. Yes, when I went to Noyes, Larrimer and Dewey there were only 5% blacks. Helen Sanford was principal at Dewey School. Everyone tried to keep out of Foster School because there were more blacks there.

Q. Did the blacks feel that the education was worse there?

A. Yes, there was reticence to send children to Foster - it was getting worse. They sent my brother first and then me. When they sent me - it wasn't a gang - but you had to beat up somebody to be accepted. I got beat up for three weeks, then I finally beat up somebody, and it was O.K. I was at Foster School from 3rd to 6th grades.

Q. Was Foster School all black then?

A. No, when I got there it was 80% white - this was in the late 20's.

Q. Were these gangs all black?

A. There weren't any "gangs." When I left it was 99-44/100% blacks - this was after three years or so.

Q. If Evanston was still fairly integrated, how did they manage to get all the black kids into one school?

A. They bused us all. You see, District 75, Mr. James Roy Skiles, assigned the children to different schools. Skiles was the racist, and they named a school after him. The white kids who lived next to Foster school were bused elsewhere for a 3¢ fare. The kids at Garnett Place (then called Ayers Place) were bused to Foster school. The school board arranged this.

Q. Did anybody object to this?

A. Yes, but each time objections were raised, they were ignored, because there was very little leadership with the charisma of Harold Washington. All they would say was "they can't do that, the Lord doesn't like it" - they would use religion and do nothing.

Q. Did your mother ever try to do anything about it?

A. My mother was the historian for the Matilda Dunbar club - have you heard of it? She tried to get the ladies to protest, but nothing happened. The ladies in the club were really something - the way they put on airs and the clothes they wore. The white

folks were more generous with their time then - they got Thursday afternoons and Sundays off. But there was not any real thrust until Jourdain, except on an individual basis and through the churches. "We have to have a hospital for our blacks, our negroes" - if you said "black" you'd get shot! So Dr. Penn used his mansion for the hospital.

Q. Where did Dr. Penn go?

A. He moved to a smaller house - he didn't need that big house. Hill, Garnett Butler, Dr. Butler got together to operate the hospital.

Q. Did they charge for their services?

A. There were plenty of jobs for blacks, and plenty of housing, but not plenty of money: people made \$2.00 a day.

Q. Why do you say that you were "incorrigible?"

A. I gave trouble to my mother. When I was 12 years old I objected to the Foster School having all black children and all white teachers and janitors. I got beat up by my teachers and then got beat up at home.

Q. How did your mother tell you to behave?

A. My mother let us go our own way - she guided us by example.... My mother's employment agency closed up in the Depression. Then she took some courses at Northwestern, then she worked as a teacher for the W.P.A. My mother would not let her maids do floors and windows, because they had men to do that. This was a plantation mentality - one woman slapped her maid because she said that Mrs. Smith would not let her do floors. My mother called her and told her to "come over and slap me!" After that she wouldn't send anymore help to that woman. She screened people coming up from the south. Those people had a good background in domestic work. At first, she sent out white maids from England, France, all over, all races. You know, she had a northern accent, because she had a teacher at Fisk University from Bangor, Maine, Mrs. Scribner - Scribner is my middle name. You'll notice I have a northern accent. People would call and say "don't send any niggers" and she'd say "O.K.". People would object if she said she was sending a colored maid. She had high standards for her maids - they came out of the south. They had even higher standards in Africa - but lost them in the "melting pot."

Q. Could we get back to Foster School?

A. The teachers liked me at Foster, incorrigible as I was. I was in Foster until 6th grade. They had a system where you could go to Haven if you were smart. All the teachers liked my mother so they said O.K. At Foster we had graduation at 8th grade but we also had a system of giving work certificates instead of diplomas to go to high school so you could work in the white folks' homes. The big idol was Booker J. Washington. He was always used as an example by the teachers because he worked for whites. There were no black teachers at Foster until the forties.

Q. Was that all the black history you were given?

A. No, George Washington Carver. Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver were regarded as quislings or Uncle Toms.

Q. Were the kids prejudiced?

A. The worst was from the teachers. One white boy called me a "nigger" and a white friend of mine beat him up. I went to high school in 1937 (sic) The elementary school teachers were dedicated, good teachers. They were all white and well prepared. That's not true today.

Q. What was the attraction of living in Evanston for blacks?

A. The same as for whites. Down home effect. It was a small community with beautiful houses and you could leave your doors unlocked. If you left your lights on your neighbors would come in and turn them off. I should have said lamps. There was no electricity.

Q. When was this?

A. 1930s - no - 1920s.

Q. Nobody had electricity?

Even the Whites?

A. They had better stoves.

Q. Could you tell us something about the Depression years?

A. Things have not changed all. The mentality hasn't changed. There were 6000 blacks in Evanston in the 30s and people were saying "that's just enough, to service the north shore homes. But nobody told them and they kept coming.

Q. Were there more blacks coming in the 30s than in the 20s?

A. I can't say there was a bigger influx in the 30s but it kept going. There was resentment over jobs that the new arrivals were taking. People would complain to my mother that these new people were coming up from the South looking for jobs. My mother said - Where did you come from when you were looking for work? They were moving houses. By the 30s the fifth ward black clientele had developed. The alderman used to buy votes with pints of whiskey.

Q. What about the WCTU?

A. There was Mrs Booze - no Mrs Tooze. (laughter) There were lots of speakeasies. You could get a drink if you wanted one. You know Mayor B. was a cohort of Al Capone, so there was plenty of booze in Evanston and then there was the Police Chief F _____ who was connected with the syndicate.

Q. Did the kids have any trouble with the police?

A. The parents were the policemen. They used willow switches so your bottom looked like a washboard. You've probably never seen one, have you? The parents had a spy system. They would call each other and inform on the children.

Q. Were the families stable?

A. They were the most stable families in Evanston. People could find jobs. They were very industrious. It was a great embarrassment to be on welfare. If you couldn't do anything else you'd go and pick up Stokes' coal off the railroad tracks.

- Q. Did the parents and children realize they were being steered into domestic service?
- A. Parents and kids knew all along. The kids got so tall that it was embarrassing to be in the lower grades. The parents weren't aggressive. They worked very hard. They got up at six to make breakfast for the family (their employer's) get the kids off to school...lunch, dinner, and babysitting until 11 at night.
- Q. Were the domestics married?
- A. Yes, there were couples but they didn't live in the employer's houses. They got around the problem of children by having aunts and grandparents take care of their children. The whole idea was not to have your children in domestic service. They wanted their kids to go to college.
- Q. Where did they go to college?
- A. Black colleges in the south.
- Q. Why didn't they go to local colleges.
- A. It was cheaper. There were no scholarships. My brother went to Georgia - Morris Brown College.
- Q. Let's get back to Haven School.
- A. I went to Haven. I left Foster as one of the smartest kids. I was good in music. I got into the boys glee club. I was the first black president of the glee club. Helen Sandford was the principal. She was part of the white flight from Foster. The attitudes of the teachers were discriminatory even though it was an integrated school. The teachers tried to embarrass you. If you knew the answer and raised your hand the teacher never called on you. But if you didn't know the answer they would call on you.
- Q. What was the attitude of the white kids?
- A. Some of my best friends were whites. (laughter) I got voted in as president of the glee club over other whites. I could go to their homes and eat lunch. We were 'their' negroes. It was a very condescending attitude. My music teacher was Mary Keyes. She was a great teacher but she was prejudiced. She was another one who had left Foster. She wanted us to sing songs like 'Lay Your Kinky Head Upon Your Mammy's Breast.' At that time Roosevelt had just been elected and he was vetoing things. When I found out what a veto was I vetoed singing this song. The other kids stayed quiet. The teachers gave me trouble about my attitude. My teacher said that General Lee sang this song and I said: "Well, who won the war?"
- Q. When was this?
- A. 1933. She always chose the most racist songs. (Mr. Smith proceeded to sing one of these. Unfortunately we had no tape recorder.) That was just too much humor for me (refers to songs). But she was a beautiful music teacher. I had to absorb what I could from what she was teaching to the white folks. She liked me because I could sing well and read notes well. Gospel songs I liked - they came out of suffering. Spirituals were born out of slavery - so they had meaning. I was unusual in standing up to them. I was captain of the basketball, baseball and softball teams. You know you have to be elected to those teams. The teachers' prejudice was innate, subconscious. It wasn't intended to destroy someone. It wasn't as strong as hatred.

- Q. We read that several of the black clubs had mutual benefit programs. What were these?
- A. There was a food coop founded in the Depression - at Foster and Maple - by blacks and whites. It didn't last. There was a network of community support. The families watched out for each other. This was the African ethic. Everybody knew everybody among the people from the South. They used such beautiful language to talk about each other. This all changed because of affluence. Roosevelt's New Deal brought a lot of money to Evanston, and destroyed the old ethic.
- Q. Did you work in the 1930's?
- A. I did a lot of odd jobs: I worked as a dishwasher in a drug-store, did yard work - the kind of work kids do.
- Q. Were you a Cubs or a Sox fan?
- A. I was a Sox fan.
- Q. Were most blacks Sox fans?
- A. Some were Cubs fans - Evanston blacks were the most conservative. They would say, "Don't do that, white folks don't do that!"
- Q. Why was there no NAACP chapter in Evanston until 1929?
- A. Evanstonians were quite proud of their color. Nobody knew what to call us, "Colored" or "Negro." "Black" was an insult. To this day, there are black folks around who won't say "black."
- Q. Why didn't they like the Cubs?
- A. The Cubs were lily-white - at least the Sox hired blacks as caretakers. When the Negro national anthem was sung, if you didn't stand up, you were shot. It was sung in the churches. The churches were the reason for all Negro progress.
- Q. Did you say "progress" or "problems?"
- A. I said "progress," but it may be both. Have you ever heard of the Negro national anthem? It was written by James W. Johnson for black schoolchildren in Jacksonville, Florida (Mr. Smith proceeded to sing a few verses). But getting back to the NAACP, I don't think that it's out of synch. There were not too many blacks in Evanston, so there was no need for it. The problems started with the influx in the 1920's. When I was in the army they sent me up to Camp McCoy in Wisconsin. There was only a handful of blacks there at first, but when a large number of southern blacks came up to the camp - that's when the trouble started. Things were okay up to then because there was no threat to the whites. Those southern blacks thought that when they crossed the Mason-Dixon line, they'd get their freedom, so they all came with big baskets to get a basket-full of freedom! Did you ever read the book, A Hundred Years of Lynching? It's out of print now, but it's something you should try to find.
- Q. You told me on the phone that you worked for Jourdain. When was that?
- A. When I was at Haven School, even before that. I was a volunteer - I didn't get paid. I was the music director for the campaign. There were big rallies at the Masonic Temple - 300 or 400 people. The Temple was built from the ground up by blacks. There were also rallies at the Foster School.

Q. How old were you?

A. 14. I wrote songs for the campaign (Mr. Smith sang two of them).

Q. Did the people think he could win?

A. There was a lot of apprehension at whether he could. In later years (1937) I worked in his office. I answered the phone and was kind of like a secretary.

Q. Do you remember election day?

A. When Joe Louis fought you could shoot a cannon down Emerson and you wouldn't hit a soul. After he won, if you fired a cannon down the street you would have killed everyone. It was the same thing on election night. Jourdain had told us all to vote before we went to work. There were huge lines. Everyone was very excited. At night everyone was outside headquarters. All blacks but a few whites. Jourdain came out and said: "We did the best we could." He always liked to keep us in suspense. He did the same thing in all his elections. He knew he had won about two hours before - he'd got the results from downtown - but he liked to drag it out - it was a psychology ploy. You know Dr. James T. Morton? He was the first black to run for the Evanston School Board before World War II. We were so proud. It was in District 65. They (we?) wanted to have rallies similar to Jourdain's. I heard that Jourdain didn't want him to win - maybe he didn't want another black in Evanston politics.

Q. Why did Jourdain only get 80% of the black vote in the first election? (1931)

A. It's that plantation mentality. There was Professor W. W. Fisher who was anti-Jourdain. He said "The time ain't ripe." He never was able to live that down. Did you know we were all Republicans then. The whole fifth ward. That all changed by 1936. The New Deal.

Q. Was the fact that Jourdain was an outsider - from Massachusetts - a possible reason for some blacks to vote against him?

A. No - that was never an issue.

Q. Let's get back to your high school years.

A. In high school I was put in the "underprivileged" class because I was a hell-raiser. They called them "X" classes. I had trouble in Math and English - but I did well in "Problems of Democracy." The teacher, Mr. Thatcher, had me speak to all four of his classes on problems of democracy. And guess what the white folks were hollering about then? Communism! They were all worried about it, but it's just an idea like any other idea and I just said that democracy is a better idea. Then I went on into music - I was in all of the groups: the boy's chorus, the advanced mixed chorus, the madrigal chorus. When I got to my third year Miss Rafferton, Mr. Nathan - all those racists got schools named after them - they had a bright idea: they put all the black students from all the music classes into one period. They said "Negro voices don't mix well with white voices." They had us signing spirituals, but how could a white woman lead spirituals? Everybody was afraid to say anything except me. They were afraid of being thrown out of school. The teacher

gave us a choice: this or nothing. One person - me - stood up for nothing. So we went to Jourdain, Morton, and others, and they went out to the high school and told the principal that an all-negro chorus was not legal. They threw me in a dungeon - homeroom - in the corner. I couldn't leave except to go to the john. This lasted for a week. I couldn't attend classes at all. After that I was never allowed to go on the fourth floor of the building, and I lost all my music credits. So I had to go to summer school.

Q. How did it feel to be the only one to stand-up against the teachers?

A. Some of the blacks resented it. Some of them say "I've never been discriminated against in my life." These are the ones who were Republican - born and who die Republican. They even voted for Nixon! There was a big difference in the age-level. At Haven School there was no problem. The day I hit high school, September, 1933, I could go down the hall and say "hello" to my friends from Haven, and they wouldn't talk to me. This was because their parents had talked to them when they reached puberty, or whatever. A few of them defied their parents, but most of them listened. The high school cafeteria was automatically segregated. So some of us said, "Why don't we sit where we want to?", and we did. The matron of the cafeteria told me to go over to where I belonged - with the rest of "them." The rest of who?

Q. Why did she pick on you in particular?

A. I was with three others, but they were all lighter than me, so I stood out. They sent me to the dungeon again.

Q. Just you?

A. Just me. In the early 60's the basketball team was all black. They had homecoming in 1963, and they had a homecoming queen. It was decided by the Board that she would come into the dance on the arms of the basketball - I mean football - team. They didn't realize at first that the team was mostly black. Do you know what they did? They said that the coach would designate the first-string team for the dame - they were all third-stringers because they were white, and the first string was all black! Back in the early years they had double everything: double baccalaureate, separate prom. They held the graduation ceremonies for the blacks at one of the churches. They even had separate YMCA's.

Q. We heard that there was a lot of white money going into the black YMCA.

A. Yes, there was white money. They used to send all the old equipment from the white YMCA. The same thing happened in the school system: they sent all the old books to Foster School. The standards there got lower and lower. History repeats itself because nobody wants to read the stuff!

